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Interreg Euro-MED

Cross Network Alliance in Sustainable Tourism

Second policy recommendations

Policy approaches and strategic directions for a green & digital transition in the Mediterranean Sustainable Tourism

Background paper in support of the Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism

By Dialogue4Tourism

Institutional dialogue on Sustainable Tourism and Governance in the Euro-MED area

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II Policy Recommendations of the Cross Network Alliance in Sustainable Tourism

Policy approaches and strategic directions for a green and digital transition in Mediterranean tourism

Interreg Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism Project

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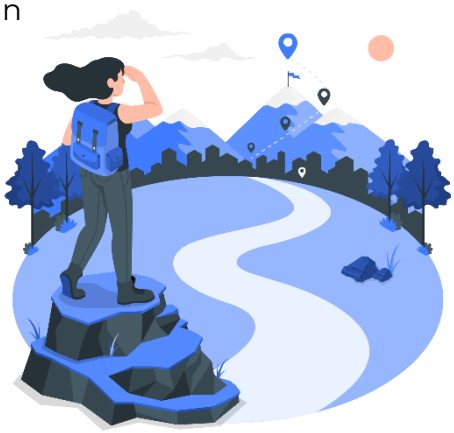
1. Foreword & Rationale

This document has been produced within the framework of the Dialogue4Tourism Project (Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission). It falls under the scope of the activity "**Liaising-Active dialogue with initiatives, strategies and other Programmes**" which aims to foster collaboration, exchange of knowledge and policy alignment across the Mediterranean region in the field of sustainable tourism.

The Interreg Euro-MED Programme supports cooperation across 14 Mediterranean countries, funding projects that address shared challenges with a focus on sustainability, resilience and smarter development. The Programme unites public, private and civil society partners.

The primary objective of this report is to present a set of governance recommendations that have emerged from the conclusions **drawn during three significant work sessions held by the Cross Network Alliance working group in the frame of the Circle the MED Forum 2025 (Athens, 3 & 4 June) and the "White Paper of on Small islands as hubs for climate resilience and sustainable tourism in the MED" Explore it here. These sessions, organized by the Interreg Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism Project, provided a platform for meaningful discussion and cooperation among key actors in governance in this field.** They were the following: "Sustainable Tourism – Cultivating a Resilient Mediterranean Ecosystem", "Building Inclusive Green and Digital Economies – Innovation for a Thriving Mediterranean Future" and "Maritime cooperation-safeguarding the blue economy and marine biodiversity".



Furthermore, the recommendations outlined in this report are intended to

complement and reinforce the strategic recommendations and proposals already established in the mentioned White Paper published by the Dialogue4Tourism Project in 2025. Moreover, seeks to serve as a background paper in support of the **Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism.**

Consultation for the new EU Strategy for Tourism

The European Commission has launched a targeted consultation to help shape a new EU Strategy for Tourism, scheduled for release in early 2026. This initiative aims to ensure that Europe remains a competitive, sustainable and inclusive tourism destination. This future strategy will tackle pressing challenges in the sector, such as: Overcrowding in popular destinations**,** environmental and social sustainability**,** shortages in green and digital skills, crisis preparedness and resilience**,** cross-border mobility and connectivity. The topics addressed in this publication of recommendations of the Cross Network Alliance closely align with the priorities identified in the consultation, highlighting common challenges and shared objectives across stakeholders and governance levels.

About Interreg Euro-MED: The Interreg Euro-MED Programme supports cooperation across 14 Mediterranean countries, funding projects that address shared challenges with a focus on sustainability, resilience and smarter development. With €294 million for 2021–2027, the Programme unites public, private and civil society partners to create a greener, climate-neutral region while enhancing governance and improving quality of life.

They reflect the contributions and perspectives of policymakers, academics, financial institutions and international organizations participating in the Cross Network Alliance discussions, including representatives from governments, regional authorities, EU institutions, research organizations and development banks.

The recommendations aim to support the development of **sustainable, resilient and inclusive tourism ecosystems across the Mediterranean region**, while strengthening cooperation, innovation and evidence-based policymaking.

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Special thanks to the moderators of the round tables:

Ioannis Mardikis (European Public Law Organisation EPLO, Greece), Alexia Spyridonidou (European Public Law Organisation EPLO, Greece). Gratitude is further extended to all panelists acknowledged within this document for their valuable contributions.

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Design and layout:

El legado andalusí Andalusian Public Foundation (Regional Ministry of Culture and Sport of Andalusia, Spain).

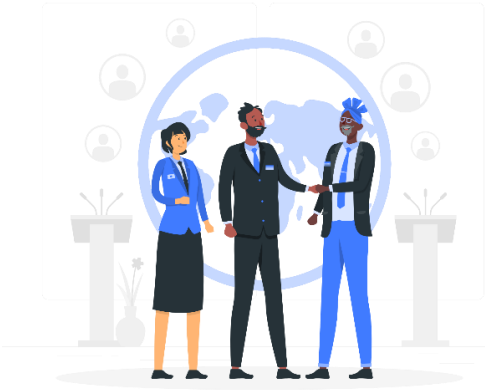
Disclaimer:

The content of this document does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the document lies entirely with the authors.

2. Introduction and contextualization

The Interreg Euro-MED is a European Territorial Cooperation Programme that supports **transnational cooperation across Mediterranean** borders. The Programme brings together **partners from 69 regions of 14 countries from the Northern shore of the Mediterranean with a common objective: a climate neutral and resilient society for the benefit of its citizens**. The Programme funds projects that are willing to bring solutions to address four complementary missions and to find concrete and shared solutions to global challenges such as the transition towards a climate neutral and resilient society. **This White Paper is published under the Sustainable Tourism Mission.**

The Dialogue4Tourism Project is one of the eight projects approved under the Governance Priority of the Interreg Euro-MED Programme.
The Mission Enhancing Sustainable Tourism is the only Mission integrating all



The Dialogue4Tourism Project is one of the eight projects approved under the Governance Priority of the Interreg Euro-MED Programme.

The Mission Enhancing Sustainable Tourism addresses the development of sustainable tourism as a transversal issue, as it is **the only Mission integrating all four Specific Objectives (Sos) of the programme**:

- **Consolidating a competitive innovation ecosystem,**
- **Supporting circular economy,**
- **Promoting climate change adaptation and risk prevention,**
- **Enhancing nature and biodiversity.**

Its overall objective is to increase the coordination level and institutional capacity of public authorities, multi-level bodies, Programmes, Strategies and Initiatives in the MED aiming to transform tourism into greener, smarter and

more resilient, embracing the fourfold approach of the mission: circularity of tourism services, environmental neutrality, sustainable ecosystem services and cultural and natural preservation of resources.

This approach goes beyond existing practices in the sector/Programme area/participating countries based on the following guidelines:

- It reinforces **sustainability and resilience** in the sector through the mobilization of tourism-related key actors and regarding a portfolio of studied, tested or ready-to-transfer solutions clustered to achieve increased innovation capacity, circular economy transition, climate change adaptation and protection of natural resources.
- It introduces **novel cooperation models and mechanisms.**
- It follows the principles of the newly introduced Euro-MED **governance projects' architecture**, including dedicated actions to improve the governance of tourism.
- **Networking and advocacy** are systematized and extend beyond national and Mediterranean levels, supported by the activation of institutional schemes that enhance the Dialogue4Tourism Project.

This activity **establishes a Cross-Network Alliance for sustainable tourism among initiatives, strategies and other programmes** and supports the flagship mechanism called "**Mediterranean Multi-programme Mechanism**" Explore it here an innovative tool to strengthen European territorial cooperation in the Mediterranean and promote sustainable tourism through; connecting beneficiaries of different Interreg programmes, supporting transferring and capitalization actions, co-developing strategies and key policy recommendations to influence the future of tourism in the Mediterranean. Ultimately the MMM will be also testing innovative funding opportunities for tourism transformation.

3. Summary of conclusions of the WG of the Cross Network Alliance for Sustainable Tourism – 2025

1. Lessons from the Thematic Projects of the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission

Target stakeholders: EU institutions, Interreg programmes, policymakers

The experiences and results generated by the thematic projects of the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission demonstrate the value of territorial experimentation in addressing sustainability challenges in Mediterranean tourism. At the same time, the projects highlight persistent barriers related to policy uptake, coordination across governance levels and the scalability of pilot solutions. These findings underline the importance of strengthening mechanisms that allow project results to effectively inform policy development at regional, national and Mediterranean levels.

Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism projects show the value of territorial experimentation for sustainability, but also reveal barriers in policy uptake, multi-level coordination and scalability, highlighting the need to better translate project results into effective public policies.

2. Shared Mediterranean challenges require coordinated governance

Target stakeholders: Mediterranean national governments, regional authorities, EU cooperation programmes

The Mediterranean tourism system is shaped by transboundary environmental, economic and social dynamics. Climate risks, water scarcity, coastal degradation and tourism seasonality affect multiple countries simultaneously, revealing the structural interdependence of Mediterranean destinations. This reinforces the need for coordinated governance approaches capable of addressing shared challenges through regional dialogue and joint policy responses.

3. Structural gaps in tourism data and knowledge systems

Target stakeholders: policymakers, statistical authorities, research institutions

Fragmentation in tourism-related data systems across Mediterranean territories. Differences in data collection methodologies, monitoring capacities and access to environmental indicators limit the ability to assess tourism impacts and anticipate emerging risks. Addressing these structural gaps is essential to improve the analytical foundation on which sustainable tourism strategies are designed and evaluated.

4. The emerging role of digital technologies in tourism governance

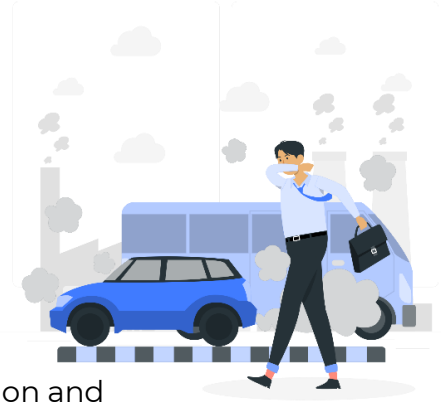
Target stakeholders: public administrations, destination management organizations DMOs, technology providers

Digital transformation is progressively redefining the governance of tourism destinations. Technologies such as digital platforms, smart monitoring systems and artificial intelligence are expanding the capacity of authorities to manage tourism flows and environmental pressures. However, the discussions highlighted that the effective integration of these tools depends on institutional readiness, data governance frameworks and digital skills within public administrations and tourism ecosystems.

5. Environmental integrity as a structural condition for tourism sustainability

Target stakeholders: environmental authorities, tourism policymakers, destination managers

The environmental integrity of coastal and marine ecosystems constitutes a fundamental condition for the sustainability of Mediterranean tourism. Degradation of biodiversity, marine pollution and ecosystem stress directly affect the quality and attractiveness of tourism destinations. The long-term viability of tourism activities is therefore intrinsically linked to the preservation and restoration of natural capital.



6. Maritime mobility as a structural component of Mediterranean Tourism

Target stakeholders: transport ministries, port authorities, maritime sector stakeholders

Digital transformation is reshaping tourism governance, with platforms, monitoring systems and AI improving management of flows and environmental pressures, but effective use depends on institutional readiness, data governance and digital skills.

The Mediterranean tourism system is highly dependent on maritime connectivity, particularly in island and remote coastal regions. The discussions highlighted that maritime transport policies have significant implications not only for accessibility and regional cohesion but also for the environmental footprint of tourism mobility. This structural dependency illustrates the importance of aligning maritime transport transitions with broader sustainability objectives.

7. Coastal and marine ecosystems as economic assets for tourism

Target stakeholders: coastal authorities, tourism development agencies

Marine ecosystems should increasingly be understood not only as environmental assets but also as strategic economic resources for tourism-dependent regions. Ecosystem services such as biodiversity conservation, coastal protection and landscape value underpin the attractiveness and resilience of many Mediterranean destinations. The degradation of these ecosystems therefore represents both an environmental and an economic risk.

8. Structural constraints affecting the sustainability transition of tourism SMEs

Target stakeholders: SMEs, chambers of commerce, economic development agencies

Small and medium-sized enterprises remain the backbone of the Mediterranean tourism economy, yet they face structural challenges in engaging with sustainability and digital transitions. Limited financial capacity, fragmented access to knowledge and administrative complexity often constrain their ability to adopt innovative practices. These structural conditions influence the pace at which sustainability transformations can occur across the tourism sector.

9. Financing the sustainable transformation of coastal tourism economies

Target stakeholders: financial institutions, investors

Achieving a sustainable transition in Mediterranean tourism will require a significant reorientation of financial flows toward environmentally responsible economic activities. Coastal tourism destinations face increasing investment needs related to climate adaptation, environmental restoration and sustainable infrastructure. Addressing these needs requires stronger alignment between public policy frameworks and sustainable finance mechanisms.

Achieving a sustainable transition in Mediterranean tourism demands redirecting financial flows toward environmentally responsible activities, as coastal destinations require growing long-term investments for climate adaptation, environmental restoration and sustainable infrastructure.

10. Strengthening knowledge transfer and policy uptake across the Mediterranean

Target stakeholders: EU institutions, regional programmes, policymakers, research institutions

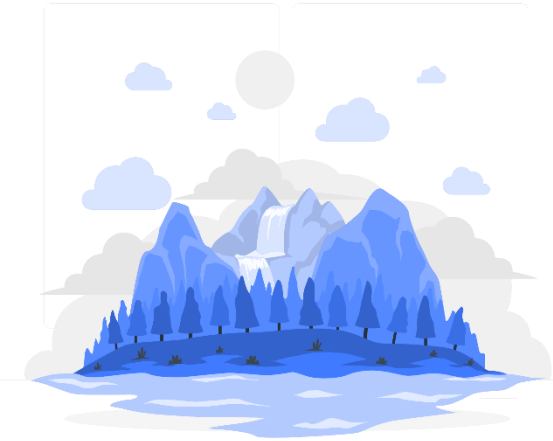
A recurring insight from the discussions concerns the persistent gap between knowledge generated through research and cooperation projects and its effective integration into policy frameworks. Numerous initiatives across the Mediterranean, particularly within EU territorial cooperation programmes— have produced valuable methodologies, tools and pilot experiences addressing sustainable tourism, climate resilience and coastal management. However, the long-term impact of these initiatives often remains limited due to insufficient mechanisms for knowledge transfer, institutional continuity and policy mainstreaming. Bridging this gap will be essential to ensure that the evidence, innovation and practical solutions developed through regional cooperation initiatives contribute to the design and implementation of sustainable tourism policies across Mediterranean territories.

4. Actionable Strategies for tourism transformation of the Interreg Euro-MED White Paper on small islands as hub for climate resilience and sustainable tourism in the MED – 2025 (Dialogue4Tourism Project)

In the Mediterranean-island context, where rising temperatures, dwindling water supplies and eroding coastlines are already reshaping tourism economies, the tourism sector, long a pillar of island livelihoods, is confronting unprecedented risks. Robust governance and forward-thinking policy are vital to help these destinations adapt and remain resilient. This section presents key recommendations for different stakeholders, drawing on research, data and case studies from the Euro-Med region with a view to developing a strong action framework that aligns with major regional agendas like the European Green Deal and the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD 2016-2025).

Local and regional authorities

Local and regional authorities on Mediterranean islands serve as the frontline in adapting tourism to climate change, using their intimate understanding of local ecosystems and community dynamics to design targeted, site-specific measures.



They translate high-level national/regional policy frameworks like the European Green Deal and the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD 2016-2025) and local stakeholders into practical policies and programmes and

their effectiveness depends on access to funding, technical capacity and multi-level cooperation.

Tilos, a small Aegean island, has become a model for community-led sustainable tourism and climate resilience. Under the local authority's leadership, the island has embraced a zero-waste vision and established a local energy community that uses solar and wind power, enabling residents to dramatically reduce electricity bills and tourism-related impacts the landmark renewable-energy project had a total cost of about €13.7 million, of which approximately €11 million was funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme.

National governments are key to aligning tourism with climate goals by creating laws, providing funding and promoting interregional coordination, scaling local initiatives into a unified and coherent national response.

Core recommendations: Mainstream climate risk and inter-sectoral nexus into spatial planning and licensing processes, through mandated development of Local Climate Adaptation Plans (LCAPs) that integrate sustainable energy, water, waste, food and mobility targets into local tourism zoning and infrastructure permitting.

National governments

National governments play a pivotal role in aligning tourism strategies with climate-objectives by legislating, funding and fostering inter-regional

coordination, turning local pilot initiatives into a cohesive national response. An example of national-level action in island adaptation is the GR-eco Islands Initiative in Greece, launched by the national government to steer Greek islands toward sustainability and climate resilience. The initiative targets non-interconnected and remote islands with interventions across energy transition, water and waste management, tourism-green infrastructure and digitalisation. It is embedded within the national climate policy

framework (Law 4936/2022) and aligns with Greece's National Adaptation Strategy, mobilising over €150 million in public resources with further investment potential up to at least €3.8 billion for 2025-2032.

Core recommendations: Establish enabling regulatory frameworks, guarantees and predictable, long-term competitive market schemes such as Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) or Contracts for Difference (CfDs) to de-risk project development and introduce dedicated fiscal incentives and blended finance mechanisms to attract private investment into islands' transitions. Enhance international cooperation to ensure transitions feed into a regional strategy.

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs)

According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), DMOs have shifted from purely marketing-oriented entities to strategic bodies that coordinate destination development, governance, stakeholder engagement and sustainability efforts.

New sustainable tourism plans strengthen governance and coordination, implement data systems and sustainability indicators and support local authorities in developing diversified, modern tourism products aligned with green and blue economy objectives.

Within the Recovery & Resilience Plan Greece 2.0 plan (RRF-funded), one specific line for "Destination management" is allocated approximately €18.45 million for the establishment and operation of Local/Regional Destination Management and Promotion Organisations and Sustainable Tourism Development Observatories. This initiative falls under Action 1 "Tourism Development" of Greece's tourism investment programme, which allocates a total of about €321 million for sub-projects including DMOs, port upgrades, accessibility improvements and other tourism infrastructure.

These plans aim to enhance destination governance and coordination, deploy data systems and sustainability indicators and provide local authorities with technical support for developing diversified, modern tourism products aligned with green and blue economy goals.

Core recommendations: Foster DMOs' evolution beyond marketing to active sustainability management, through mandated implementation of demand-side control tools and sustainability key performance indicators (KPIs) that track environmental footprint and social equity, to guide promotion and certification.

SMEs and tourism businesses

SMEs and tourism Businesses are the backbone of island tourism economies, representing many businesses in sectors such as hospitality, transport, gastronomy and local crafts. Their close connection to local communities and environments enables them to deliver authentic experiences while supporting cultural preservation and job creation. On islands where economic diversity is limited, SMEs play a critical role in maintaining livelihoods and ensuring year-round economic stability.

To support tourism SMEs, Cyprus introduced a fiscal incentive scheme (approved by the European Commission on 14 February 2022 under State-aid case SA.63127) to support private investment in early-stage, innovative SMEs, as part of the country's Recovery & Resilience Plan (RRP) under the Recovery & Resilience Facility (RRF).

Under the scheme, investors (natural persons or companies) injecting capital into certified innovative SMEs may claim an income tax relief of up to 30 % of the invested amount, subject to caps: the deduction may not exceed 50 % of the investor's taxable income each year, is capped at €150,000 per year and at €750,000 over five years. The scheme was designed to run until 31 December 2023. It was judged by the Commission to be necessary and appropriate for fostering Cyprus's under-developed venture capital market, and the aid was deemed proportionate thanks to the built-in caps and protections.

Core recommendations: Introduce green performance incentive schemes, offering tax credits, reduced fees, or fast-track permits to businesses that meet targets for water efficiency, waste reduction and energy self-

consumption, including participating in energy communities and prioritizing local supply chains such as for sourcing food and services.

Cross-border initiatives

Mediterranean islands often struggle to secure adequate financing for climate adaptation and sustainable tourism because of multiple interlinked challenges. They typically face limited financial capacity and high dependence on the mainland, which reduce their ability to shore up investment in resilient infrastructure or innovation.

The MedFund, created in 2015 by France, Monaco and Tunisia, mobilizes funding for Mediterranean marine protected areas, aiming for €30 million to support 20 MPAs and strengthen ecosystem resilience.

The MedFund is a non-profit environmental trust fund established in 2015 by France, Monaco and Tunisia (with the support of the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation) to mobilise private, philanthropic and multilateral funding for marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Mediterranean.

It aims to reach a capital of €30 million to provide long-term sustainable financing for around 20 MPAs covering 7,000 km² by 2025. The fund supports island regions and coastal zones by strengthening ecosystem resilience and enabling conservation-based tourism and climate-adaptation measures in under-funded marine areas.

Core recommendations: Establish dedicated financing mechanism for island resilience that combine EU/multilateral grants with highly concessional support, specifically structured to cover the initial stages of the energy transition (planning, feasibility, preliminary analysis, regulatory reviews, etc.) and crucial infrastructure such as power grids and energy storage, with a view to catalyse private capital.

Private sector investors

Private investment is crucial for Mediterranean islands because it brings in essential capital, expertise and innovation to upgrade infrastructure that small and remote destinations often cannot develop with public funds alone.

On the island of Milos, the infrastructure investor installed a seawater reverse-osmosis desalination plant producing up to 4,500 m^3 per day, powered by an 850-kW wind turbine. The construction cost was approximately €6 million. This investment supports the island's sustainability by securing reliable potable water supply year-round (including during peak tourist season), reducing dependence on water transported via tanker ships and aligning with renewable-energy use to minimize carbon footprint and strengthen local resource resilience.

Core recommendations: Consider islands as high-potential markets for pilot projects and replicable, integrated technological and nature-based solutions. Apply Multi-Benefit Analysis in tender applications/project proposals shifting focus from profit-only to include socio-economic, environmental and resilience returns.

Researchers and data-driven policies

Research has become a foundational pillar for designing and implementing effective tourism policies in Mediterranean island destinations. For example, a 2024 study (university of Palermo and University of Catania) analysed tourism seasonality across Mediterranean islands between 2008-2018 using statistical indicators to reveal how extreme seasonal peaks and troughs pose serious sustainability risks.

For the island of Sardinia, the average seasonality indicates that peak (July and August) periods saw nearly 46 times more overnights than the lowest months. he studies highlighted that islands with extreme seasonality are prone to employment instability, infrastructure overload during peaks and underutilization in off-seasons, underscoring the need for tailored policy responses and diversified demand.

The study's data-driven outcomes support tailored policy recommendations in places like Sardinia and Sicily: diversifying tourism beyond summer, improving infrastructure to handle peaks and designing local governance strategies that buffer the extremes of demand. This section to further reformulated with the support of contributing external institutions but not longer.

Core recommendations: Formalize the link between science and government by creating formal science-policy interfaces and standardized data reporting platforms across Mediterranean islands, to ensure researchers and local authorities share real time, comparable metrics on environmental load and climate impact for science-based decision-making.

Regional Management Authorities (RMAs)

Regional Management Authorities (RMAs) are essential intermediaries linking national tourism strategies with local implementation. They develop, coordinate and monitor medium- and long-term tourism policies, adapting national objectives to regional contexts and ensuring that tourism development aligns with environmental protection, cultural heritage and community well-being. RMAs manage regional funding, guide infrastructure and innovation projects and coordinate responses to crises such as natural disasters, pandemics, or overtourism.

Effective sustainable tourism governance depends on coordinated action across scales. At the local level, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) work directly with municipalities, SMEs and communities to shape tourism products and collect visitor data. RMAs harmonize these local initiatives, ensuring they align with broader regional strategies and providing guidance through funding, capacity building and joint planning. National authorities set overarching goals and provide resources, while RMAs translate these into regional strategies and feed territorial insights back into

national planning. Internationally, RMAs and DMOs represent their destinations, participate in EU cooperation projects and align with global frameworks such as UNWTO, OECD and the EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy. Their engagement in initiatives like the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism strengthens climate-aligned governance and positions regions as active contributors to global sustainability goals.

Core recommendations: emphasize empowering RMAs to translate national tourism goals into region-specific, sustainable policies, enhance coordination with DMOs and national authorities, build capacity and provide guidance, promote data-driven planning, align with EU and global frameworks, foster international collaboration and develop adaptive strategies for crisis resilience and long-term sustainable tourism.

Local task forces and regional coordination units (RCUs)

The NaTour4CChange project offers a practical demonstration of how Mediterranean regions and small islands can become catalysts for climate resilience and sustainable tourism through coordinated governance and the strategic use of Nature-based Solutions (NbS). The project demonstrates how inter-departmental and multi-stakeholder governance structures can accelerate climate-resilient and sustainable tourism development. Participating territories—ranging from larger islands such as Sardinia and Crete to smaller island destinations like Koufonisi and coastal protected areas such as Capo Carbonara, Dugi Otok and Cabo de Gata Natural Park— have tested new approaches to align their climate and tourism agendas and to move towards an integrated, ecosystem-based approach.

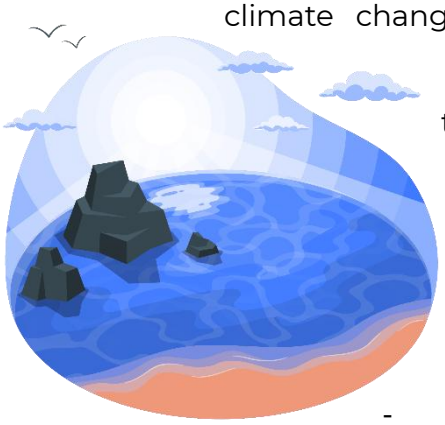
Regional Coordination Units can base their strategies on tools developed by the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission, including a climate action blueprint and a Mediterranean-adapted toolkit that support authorities in planning, prioritising measures and monitoring progress with relevant indicators.

Across five partner regions (Andalusia, Zadar County, Neretva Canton, Crete, Sardinia,), the project established Regional Coordination Units (RCUs),

formally mandated, cross-sectoral task forces designed to harmonize climate, tourism and territorial policies.

An RCU brings together key public departments such as tourism, environment, climate change, civil protection, agriculture and transport, while ensuring active participation from private stakeholders, academia, protected area managers and civil society organizations. Its mandate is to develop a coherent Regional Tourism Climate Strategy/Plan, oversee pilot sites where Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are tested and ensure inclusive, multi-level coordination consistent with EU and national frameworks. While each region adapts the RCU model to its institutional structure, all units follow a shared methodology, common templates (engagement letters etc.) and a co-creation approach that ensures continuity beyond the project's lifetime.

This approach has proven particularly relevant in insular regions where climate change impacts (coastal erosion, water scarcity, heatwaves, extreme weather) directly threaten tourism assets, local livelihoods and natural heritage. The RCUs can build their strategies and plans on tools co-developed within the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission, notably:



- The Blueprint for Tourism Climate Action Plans, developed with NECSTouR, the Travel Foundation and CPMR-IMC, providing a clear methodology for regional and local authorities.
- The Toolkit for Climate Action in Tourism, adapted to the realities of Mediterranean regions to help authorities define objectives, prioritize actions and monitor progress with context-appropriate indicators.

Sardinia's RCU integrates the departments of environment, tourism, agriculture and transport, working through regular bi-monthly meetings. The unit coordinates NbS testing in the Marine Protected Area of Capo Carbonara, ensuring that interventions such as dune and habitat restoration are aligned with regional climate adaptation, tourism and coastal management strategies. This approach strengthens multi-sectoral collaboration and improves coherence across existing plans.

The Cretan RCU brings together the Departments of Environment, Tourism and Civil Protection of Crete Region, with pilot activities located in Ori Zakrou and Koufonisi Island. A designated RCU coordinator facilitates information flow between departments, organizes regular stakeholder meetings and ensures alignment between regional planning and on-the-ground NbS interventions. This model enhances coordination between regional authorities and island destinations, helping integrate climate data, water scarcity concerns and tourism development needs.

The RCU model provides a replicable governance mechanism for Mediterranean regions and islands seeking to institutionalize integrated climate–tourism planning. The establishment of RCUs creates regional durable governance structures that bridge administrative silos and connect tourism, environment and climate policy, opening cooperation between departments previously operating independently. Participatory approaches via workshops empower local communities, increasing ownership of climate adaptation efforts. Training and shared tools strengthen local authorities' capacity to plan, manage and monitor tourism climate actions.

By formalizing cross-sectoral collaboration and embedding NbS within strategic frameworks, RCUs enable territories to transition more effectively toward resilient, low-carbon and nature-positive tourism development.

Core recommendations: emphasize establishing Regional Coordination Units (RCUs) to harmonize climate, tourism and territorial policies through multi-level, participatory governance. By integrating Nature-based Solutions, aligning strategies with EU and national frameworks, enhancing multi-sectoral coordination and building local capacity, RCUs create a replicable model for resilient, low-carbon and nature-positive tourism planning across Mediterranean regions and islands.

5.Key governance recommendations of the Cross Network Alliance Working Group – 2025

This governance recommendations have emerged from the conclusions drawn during three significant work sessions held by the Cross Network Alliance working group in the frame of the Circle the MED Forum 2025 (Athens, 3 & 4 June) and the "White Paper of on Small islands as hubs for climate resilience and sustainable tourism in the MED" Explore it here These sessions, organized by the Interreg Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism Project, provided a platform for meaningful discussion and cooperation among key actors in governance in this field.

Executive summary of these key policy recommendations:

The Cross Network Alliance recommends a coordinated Mediterranean approach to accelerate the green and digital transition of tourism through the following priorities:

- **Develop a common data governance framework** with shared indicators, interoperable data systems and evidence-based decision-making across Mediterranean destinations.
- **Promote digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence** to improve tourism planning, monitor visitor flows, optimize resource use and strengthen destination management.
- **Enhance regional cooperation** by promoting knowledge exchange, shared digital infrastructures and coordinated policy actions to address common Mediterranean challenges.
- **Strengthening climate resilience** by improving water and energy efficiency, promoting circular economy practices and scaling up successful sustainability initiatives.

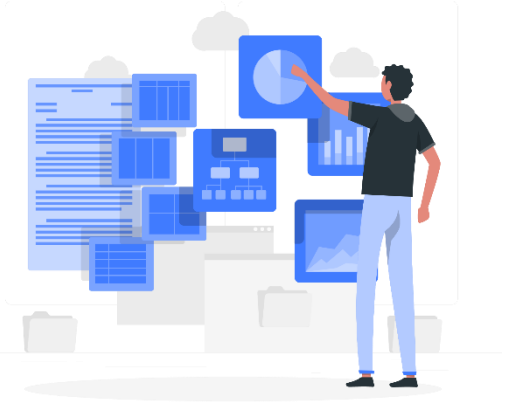
- **Promote sustainable maritime mobility** through low-emission transport, green ports and cleaner technologies while ensuring accessibility for island and coastal regions.
- **Integrate carrying-capacity assessments and spatial planning** into tourism policies to prevent overtourism, protect natural and cultural heritage and support balanced territorial development.
- **Support SMEs in the green and digital transition** through capacity building, innovation support, digital tools, fiscal incentives and access to finance.
- **Mobilise sustainable finance** by increasing investments in climate-resilient infrastructure, renewable energy and blue economy projects through innovative financial instruments.
- **Invest in skills and education** to equip tourism professionals and public authorities with the competencies required for sustainable destination management.
- **Strengthen multi-level governance** by fostering collaboration among governments, businesses, researchers, local communities and regional networks to ensure coordinated and inclusive tourism policies.

These recommendations have been structured in the sessions follows: **"Sustainable Tourism – Cultivating a Resilient Mediterranean Ecosystem"**, **"Building Inclusive Green and Digital Economies – Innovation for a Thriving Mediterranean Future"** and "**Maritime cooperation-safeguarding the blue economy and marine biodiversity**".

Thematic area: Data, digital innovation and transformation

Develop a Mediterranean framework for data-driven tourism governance

Effective tourism management requires reliable data, monitoring mechanisms and analytical tools capable of informing policy decisions. A Mediterranean-wide framework for tourism data collection, monitoring and analysis should therefore be strengthened.

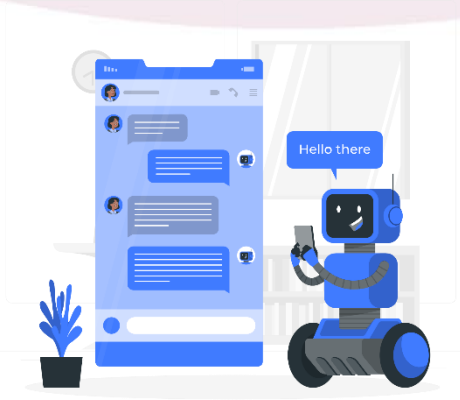


Such a framework should promote the use of shared indicators and interoperable data systems to measure tourism impacts on environmental resources, infrastructure and local communities. Key indicators could include tourism flows, seasonality patterns, carbon emissions, water consumption, waste generation and biodiversity pressures.

Digital technologies —including data platforms, smart destination tools and AI-based forecasting systems— can significantly enhance the ability of policymakers to anticipate tourism demand, manage visitor flows and identify sustainability risks.

By strengthening evidence-based policymaking, Mediterranean destinations will be better equipped to design tourism strategies that balance economic development with environmental protection and social well-being.

Integration of artificial intelligence into Sustainable Tourism and resource management Governments in the Mediterranean region should incorporate Artificial Intelligence into tourism governance and environmental monitoring systems. AI can support evidence-based decision-making by analyzing tourism flows, predicting environmental pressures on destinations and optimizing the use of resources such as energy, water and food in tourism infrastructure. However, as highlighted by Sandrine Kergroach, the effective use of AI requires complementary technologies, strong data governance frameworks and a workforce equipped with digital and analytical skills. Policymakers should therefore promote digital literacy programs and regulatory frameworks that ensure AI contributes to climate neutrality and sustainable territorial development.



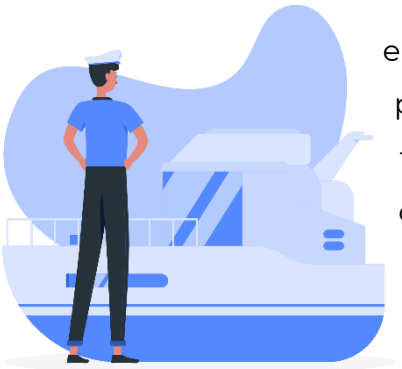
Advancing regional cooperation to address shared Mediterranean challenges

Many of the challenges facing the Mediterranean region —such as climate change, water scarcity, pollution and socioeconomic inequality— require coordinated responses across national borders. Strengthening regional cooperation frameworks can facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources and best practices. As highlighted by Themis Christophidou, EU cohesion policies and regional programs such as Euro-MED and Next-MED are key instruments for fostering resilience, innovation and climate action in Mediterranean territories. In addition, Cleopatra Kitti emphasized the importance of developing shared data systems to support evidence-based policymaking. Establishing regional data infrastructures would allow governments to better monitor environmental trends, evaluate policy impacts and coordinate sustainable development strategies.

Develop digital monitoring systems for sustainable coastal and marine tourism

Mediterranean tourism destinations should strengthen the use of digital monitoring tools to better understand and manage the environmental impacts of coastal and marine tourism. Advanced data systems —including satellite monitoring, smart sensors and digital platforms— can help track maritime traffic, visitor flows in coastal areas, marine pollution and ecosystem health indicators.

Regional programs such as Euro-MED and Next-MED are key instruments for fostering resilience, innovation and climate action in Mediterranean territories.



Integrating tourism data with maritime and environmental monitoring systems would allow policymakers to better assess the pressures that tourism activities place on marine ecosystems and coastal infrastructure. Such integrated digital tools could support early warning systems for environmental risks, improve destination management and help authorities design targeted sustainability policies.

By promoting digital innovation and shared regional data platforms, Mediterranean countries can strengthen evidence-based governance of coastal tourism while ensuring that tourism growth remains compatible with marine ecosystem protection.

Thematic area: Climate resilience, circular economy and environmental sustainability

Strengthen climate resilience and resource efficiency in tourism destinations

Climate change is one of the most significant threats to the sustainability of Mediterranean tourism. Rising temperatures, water scarcity, coastal flooding and ecosystem degradation pose growing risks for destinations that depend heavily on natural resources and environmental attractiveness.

Policies should therefore promote climate-resilient tourism systems that prioritize resource efficiency, particularly in relation to water and energy consumption.

Tourism businesses —especially accommodation providers—should be encouraged to adopt water-saving technologies, water reuse systems, energy-efficient infrastructure and circular waste management practices. These measures are particularly relevant for island and coastal regions where water scarcity is already a critical issue.

EU-funded initiatives and pilot projects addressing water management, circular economy practices and environmental monitoring should be further scaled and replicated across the Mediterranean region. Strengthening resource efficiency within the tourism sector will contribute to both climate mitigation and long-term economic resilience.

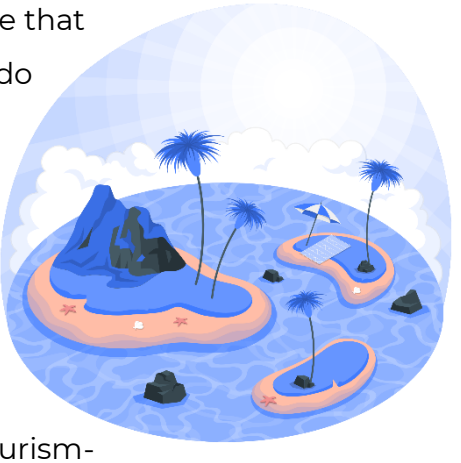
Accelerate the implementation of circular economy strategies

The Mediterranean Sea faces significant environmental challenges, including marine pollution, waste accumulation and ecosystem degradation. To address these challenges, policymakers should prioritize the transition toward circular economy models that reduce waste generation, improve resource efficiency and extend product life cycles. According to Antonis Mavropoulos, digital technologies such as AI and advanced data systems can support circular economy initiatives by improving waste management, monitoring material flows and identifying opportunities for waste prevention. Nevertheless, governments must also consider the environmental footprint of digital infrastructures and ensure that technological innovation aligns with sustainability objectives.

Promote sustainable maritime connectivity and low-emission transport for island tourism

Sustainable tourism development in the Mediterranean must address the environmental impact of maritime transport, which plays a critical role in connecting island and coastal destinations. Policymakers should support the transition toward low-emission ferry systems, green port infrastructure and alternative fuels to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and pollution from maritime tourism mobility.

At the same time, policies should ensure that efforts to decarbonize maritime transport do not compromise accessibility or affordability for residents and visitors traveling to island destinations. Investments in sustainable ports, electrification, digital port management systems and cleaner vessels can improve environmental performance while maintaining reliable connectivity for tourism-dependent regions.



Strengthening sustainable maritime mobility will therefore contribute to both climate mitigation and the long-term resilience of island tourism economies.

Integrate carrying capacity and spatial planning into tourism policies

Tourism growth in many Mediterranean destinations has historically been driven by entrepreneurial initiatives rather than integrated territorial planning. As a result, several regions now face increasing challenges related to overtourism, unregulated coastal development and pressure on natural and cultural heritage sites.

The Interreg Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism project created a platform for meaningful dialogue and cooperation among governance actors, addressing sustainable tourism, inclusive green and digital economies and maritime cooperation to protect the blue economy and marine biodiversity in the Mediterranean.

To address these issues, tourism strategies should systematically incorporate carrying capacity assessments and spatial planning tools into tourism governance frameworks. This approach requires evaluating the environmental, social and infrastructural limits of tourism activities within specific territories. These assessments should inform policy decisions related to infrastructure development, tourism investments, urban planning and land use regulation.
Integrating carrying capacity considerations into tourism policies will enable destinations to prevent environmental degradation, protect cultural heritage assets and maintain the quality of life of local communities, while ensuring the long-term viability of tourism economies.

Thematic area: Inclusive economic transition, skills and finance for sustainability

Support SMEs and local tourism ecosystems in the sustainability transition

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent the backbone of the tourism economy across the Mediterranean. However, many tourism SMEs face significant barriers in adopting sustainable practices, including limited financial resources, lack of technical expertise and insufficient access to innovation networks.

Policy initiatives should therefore focus on supporting SMEs through capacity building, digital tools and innovation support mechanisms. Regional innovation hubs, knowledge-sharing platforms and training programmes can help tourism businesses integrate sustainability into their operations while improving competitiveness and resilience. These initiatives should encourage collaboration between tourism operators, research institutions, technology providers and public authorities.

SMEs are vital to Mediterranean economies but face challenges adopting sustainable technologies and digital innovation. Policymakers should provide targeted support through training, fiscal incentives and financial instruments to reduce risks and facilitate sustainable investments.

Furthermore, strengthening local value chains and cross-sector collaboration —particularly between tourism, agriculture, culture and creative industries— can diversify tourism offerings and reduce economic vulnerability in destinations heavily dependent on tourism.

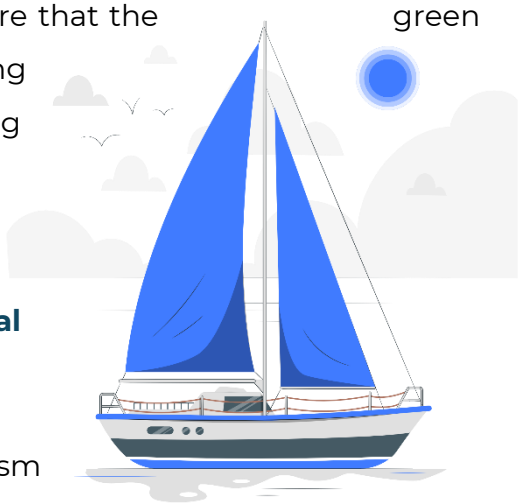
Strengthening support mechanisms for tourism SMEs and policymakers

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a central role in Mediterranean economies but often face barriers in adopting sustainable technologies and digital innovation. Policymakers should therefore design targeted support mechanisms, including training programs, fiscal incentives

and financial instruments that reduce investment risks. As noted by Constantina Kottaridi, mobilizing private capital and creating risk-sharing mechanisms are essential to encourage SMEs to participate in the green and digital transition. Local authorities should also be empowered through capacity-building initiatives, enabling them to implement sustainability strategies that reflect local economic and environmental conditions.

Financing climate-neutral Mediterranean and sustainable tourism transition

Achieving climate neutrality in the Mediterranean region requires substantial financial resources and coordinated policy frameworks. Multilateral development banks, national governments and private investors must work together to mobilize investments in renewable energy, climate-resilient infrastructure and sustainable economic activities. As emphasized by Adonai Herrera-Martínez in one of the round tables, financial institutions can support governments by designing appropriate regulatory frameworks, environmental safeguards and financing mechanisms that facilitate green investments. It is equally important to ensure that the green transition remains inclusive, providing economic opportunities while protecting vulnerable communities and workers affected by structural economic changes.



Scale up blue finance for sustainable coastal and marine tourism

The transition toward sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean requires increased financial support for projects that protect marine ecosystems while generating economic benefits for coastal communities. Financial institutions, development banks and private investors should therefore expand financing mechanisms dedicated to sustainable blue economy activities.

Innovative financial instruments —such as blue bonds, sustainability-linked loans and ocean investment funds— can help mobilize capital for

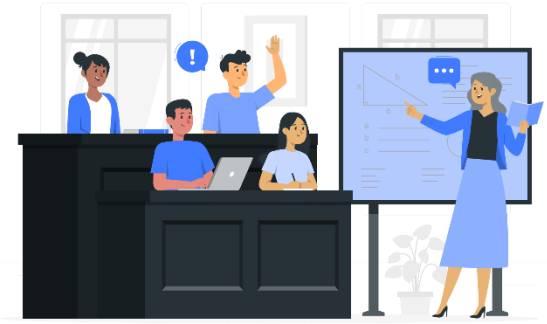
projects related to marine conservation, sustainable coastal infrastructure, eco-tourism initiatives and restoration of marine ecosystems.

Redirecting financial flows toward environmentally responsible tourism and coastal development will not only reduce risks associated with environmental degradation but also create new opportunities for economic diversification and long-term resilience in Mediterranean coastal destinations.

Strengthening education, skills development and multi-stakeholder governance

Achieving sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean requires coordinated action across multiple governance levels and sectors. Policymakers, tourism businesses, local communities, researchers and educational institutions must work together to address complex sustainability challenges.

Educational programmes, training initiatives and academic partnerships can play a key role in developing the skills and knowledge required for sustainable tourism management. Experiential learning programmes that expose students and professionals to real sustainability challenges can help foster a new generation of tourism leaders. At the same time, stronger multi-level governance mechanisms are needed to ensure coordination between local, regional, national and transnational stakeholders.



Platforms such as the Cross Network Alliance can facilitate dialogue, knowledge exchange and policy alignment across Mediterranean regions. By strengthening stakeholder collaboration and participatory governance, tourism policies can better reflect the needs of local communities while safeguarding natural and cultural resources for future generations.

Main stakeholders engaged in the WG of the Cross Network Alliance for Sustainable Tourism - year 2025 (speakers & contributors in the round tables)

The list below includes the stakeholders who participated as **speakers and contributors** in the three round tables mentioned at Circle the MED Forum 2025. We would like to sincerely thank all participants for their valuable contributions and commitment.

This list reflects the Cross-Network Alliance's ongoing efforts to bring together stakeholders from diverse programmes and initiatives, EU institutions / EU or global Mediterranean Advocacy organisations / national level, local level, demonstrating its aim to go **beyond the Interreg Euro-MED ecosystem**. It further illustrates the Alliance's work across different territories and governance levels, in line with the **multilevel governance** approach promoted by the D4T project.

Session "Sustainable Tourism – Cultivating a resilient Mediterranean ecosystem"

- Lina Annab
  Minister of Tourism & Antiquities, Jordan
- Axel Rodríguez Garrote
  Project & Programme Development Officer Interreg Euro-MED
- George Vernicos
  Secretary General SETE, President INSETE
- Dr. Ornela Çuçi
  Former Deputy Minister of Tourism and Environment of Albania, environmental scientist, seasoned policymaker and international climate finance expert
- Panagiotis Sakelaropoulos
  Tourism Development Region of Western Greece

- Simone Bastianoni
  Vice Rector, Professor of Environmental and Cultural Heritage Chemistry, University of Siena
- Konstantinos Karampourniotis. Climate and circular economy expert
- Bell Cameron, Director of Civic Engagement, Hellenic American University
- Dr. Sofia Avgerinou-Kolonia. Architect, Professor Emeritus at the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA), Vice President of ICOMOS Hellenic and Honorary President of CIVVIH-ICOMOS

Session "Building inclusive green and digital economies – Innovation for a thriving Mediterranean future – Circle the MED Forum 2025

- Themis Christophidou
  Director-General of the European Commission's Regional and Urban Policy department
- Marija Pujo Tadić
  Special Advisor/Envoy for Climate Action of the Republic of Croatia and President of the International Institute for Climate Action (IICA)
- Sandrine Kergroach
  Senior Economist and policy analyst at the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities (CFE)
- Vassilis Koutsoumpas
  Digital Policy and AI Adviser at the Presidency of the Government, Office of the Prime Minister of Greece.
- Antonis Mavropoulos
  Former President of the International Solid Waste Association (ISWA) and CEO of the consulting firm D-Waste
- Adonai Herrera - Martinez
  Director, Environment and Sustainability European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)

- Cleopatra Kitti
  Founder of the Mediterranean Growth Initiative (MGI)
- Constantina Kottaridi
  Professor at the University of Piraeus, Department of Economics

Session "Maritime cooperation – Safeguarding the blue economy"

- Vassilis Kikilias
  Minister of Maritime Affairs and Insular Policy of Greece
- Dr. Susan Gardner
  Director of the Ecosystems Division of the United Nations Environment Programme
- Dr. Alicia Bugeja
  Malta's Junior Minister for Fisheries, Aquaculture and Animal Rights
- Dr. Dionysia-Theodora Avgerinopoulou
  Chair of the Environment Committee of the Greek Parliament, Hellenic Parliament
- Dr. Stelios Himonas
  Permanent Secretary of Shipping Deputy Ministry, Republic of Cyprus
- Maria Damanaki
  Independent Advisor on Climate - Oceans
- Alexandra Cousteau
  Co-Founder and President of Oceans 2050
- Patricia Charlebois
  Deputy Director, Marine Environment Division, International Maritime Organization (IMO)
- Ruben Eiras
  Secretary General of Forum Oceano, Portugal
- Martin Koehring
  Ocean and Finance Specialist at the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI)
- Paolo Mossone
  General Director of the IMC Foundation

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EPLO European Public Law Organization

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